

Different Brains, Different Learners: How to Reach the Hard to Reach. Second Edition. Eric Jensen. Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA. 2010. 189 pages. ISBN 1-4129-6502-6

THIS BOOK FOCUSES ON THE STUDENTS who do not respond positively even in well-managed learning environments. Jensen describes this book as “a practical, comprehensive survey that tells you in plain language how to recognize the most common conditions that challenge learners, and how to help them succeed”. He believes that understanding the cerebral systems will help teachers focus their efforts on the skills that will give them the biggest return for their time.

He believes that there are no unreachable students, and that teachers implementing his suggested strategies will become much more efficient and effective teachers of diverse learners. He perceives the answer is to working smarter, rather than harder. Teachers need to learn how to accommodate various disorders, and know when it is important to refer a student for outside expert consultation.

The author prepares the reader for the text by presenting “10 Truths Before You Begin” in the Introduction. These are essential to implement the strategies he suggests.

Chapter One: Understanding Different Brains, begins with the premise that all brains are unique and that differences are the norm, not the exception. Thus, the misbehaving and underperforming brain must be ‘viewed not as a problem, but as a mystery to solve’. Gene expression is a huge source of differentiation among humans. It is the capacity of the environment to influence genetic messages that “tells genes to make proteins or not.”

He feels that even though genetics contribute 30-50 % of life’s outcomes, they are only part of the equation. Interactions between genes and the environment, and everyday experiences are the two largest parts of the behavioral and learning equation.

Jensen repeatedly asserts that students are not stuck the way they are because their successes are dependent on their operating systems which can be upgraded. Building capacity to learn is much more important than adding more content. In school situations, the operating system has two of the four parts of the big picture—hope and the skills needed. Accommodations and enrichment must be added to complete what the author calls the ‘sea of hope’ for students. Teachers will formulate a plan that accelerates the chances for student success when skill building, accommodations, enrichment, and hope are brought together.

Chapter Two: The Brain’s Key Operating Systems, discusses the two primary operating systems of the brain: the social and the academic. Using the operating system model, educators learn what is different in the brain, and how to understand these differences while addressing the problems of the learner. The author emphasizes that all students can learn and educators must have the will, time, and the resources to make it happen. To begin, the chapter focuses on the six primary systems of the brain’s social operating system: sensory awareness, social reasoning, theory of mind, affiliation and empathy, emotional states, and reward evaluation. Jensen defines each system, and then suggests strategies for use in class to strengthen/enhance each set of skills.

For example: Social reasoning involves the capacity to make decisions with others in mind, to gain acceptance within a given group, and to manage the effects of peer pressure. Students need experience being a part of cooperative learning groups and classroom activities. Listening skills need to be taught explicitly as part of the cooperative learning activity. Direct instruction coaching can be used with all ages, while he suggests the use of case studies for older children.

The author notes that academic skills have a brain system that overlaps with social skills in the areas of awareness and attention. At school, relationships, socialization and social status interact, mitigate or support the academic operating system. Each of the critical processes in the brain’s academic operating system is malleable, trainable, and can be improved. Jensen labeled the academic operating System—CHAMPS, an acronym that refers to a champion’s mindset, hope, attention, memory, processing, and sequencing. He describes each part, and then suggests specific strategies to build up and/or upgrade the student’s operating system by strengthen the learner’s skills.

For example: Attentional skills and delayed gratification: Here Jensen relates that paying attention is not an innate skill and it takes practice to learn to focus on the details over time. He suggests building focus through high-interest reading, building attention through focused practice in dance, martial arts, chess, model building, and sports. He includes helpful web sites.

THE TEXT, IN CHAPTERS 3 THROUGH 13, focuses on learners with specific social and academic issues. Jensen uses the following topics to define, discuss, and increase the reader’s knowledge of the learner while offering effective strategies to enhance their skills. Within the title of Impact, the author discusses Demographics, Commentary, Likely Causes, Brain Areas Involved, and Recognizable Symptoms.

He follows this essential information with two additional sections: What You Can Do and Supplemental Resources. He discusses: The Argumentative Learner: Oppositional Defiant Disorder; The Resigned Learner: Learned Helplessness; The Out-of-Control Learner: Conduct Disorder; The Demotivated Learner: Stress Disorder; The Troubled Learner: Depression; The Isolated Learner: Pervasive Developmental Disorders; The Challenged Learner: Learning Delayed; The Confused Learner: Dyscalculia; The Unsound Learner: Central Auditory Processing Disorder; The Impulsive Learner: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; and The Frustrated Learner: Dyslexia.

Professional Opinion

IN MY OPINION *Different Brains, Different Learners* is a powerful book offering readers a wealth of research-based information that focuses on the function, structure, systems and processes of the brain. Teachers will increase their understanding of many disorders, and be able to accommodate the diverse learners in their classroom. While stating that there is considerable overlap in the disorders, and that it is likely that all are multi-causal, Jensen discusses each disorder and their recognizable symptoms, separately, in a well organized format. Teachers reading this text will gain an understanding of the cerebral systems, and become aware of the new findings regarding changing the brain. This information will assist them in developing an educational plan that will enhance learning for each of their students. Providing students with a threat-free learning environment that focuses on students’ strengths, fairness, and consistent daily expectations—while implementing Jensen’s accommodations, skill building, and enrichment—will accelerate students’ chances for success. This text would be useful as a focus for college courses, for teacher preparation seminars, for school faculty, and for educators at every level.

It is impossible in the space provided to project all that is valuable in this book. Perhaps the sense of the author’s genuine passion for helping students faced with these conditions, his positive attitude, and the hope that he generates is most important.

JOANNE ZINSER MANN
Powell, Ohio